

GEOGRAPHICAL CHANGE IN TASMANIAN AGRICULTURE
DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

by

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DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other higher degree or graduate diploma in any University and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text.

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ABSTRACT

One indicator of a stagnant economy has been a slow rate of population growth. If Tasmania had been able to retain its natural increase between the first postwar census in 1921 and the second in 1933, the final population would have been 256,170. The recorded population was only 227,599. The difference was a result of out-migration during the 1920s. The flow across Bass Strait was sufficient in one period, 1923/24 to 1926/27 inclusive, to cancel the natural increase and reduce the population of the state. The poor performance of agriculture was seen as the central factor in the process of economic decline. Report after report condemned farming as backward, inefficient and disorganised and called for a restructuring of the rural economy as the first step in overcoming the state's chronic problems of low incomes and population loss.

The initial strategy of agricultural reform was defined by Dr. S.S. Cameron, Director of the Victorian Department of Agriculture. Cameron had been brought to Tasmania in 1925 by the Labour government of J.A. Lyons to examine the deteriorating agricultural situation. He concluded that the principal aim of agricultural development should be to increase the output of commodities that had a proven export record from Australia (e.g. wool, wheat, lamb, fruit and butter) or that could be worked up into a profitable export trade such as peas or eggs. Efficiency in production and marketing was to be stressed. Crops that were produced primarily for the domestic market (potatoes, barley, hops) were to be reduced.

The Department of Agriculture was reorganised and given a mandate to bring Tasmanian agriculture up to the Australian norm. It followed the Cameron plan with the exception that livestock enterprises were favoured over cropping in order to restore fertility to the depleted farmlands of the Northwest Coast and North Midlands. Considerable progress was made along these lines before the rural economy was overcome by the collapse of commodity prices in October 1929.

This study has been structured as a developmental narrative. Statistical and archival sources have been brought together to investigate the evolution of farming systems between 1926/27 and 1936/37. The thesis begins with an overview of the agricultural situation in the

mid-1920s. Agricultural regions are defined for 1926/27 using both the Weaver method and cluster analysis on derived estimates of net farm income at the municipality level. The body of the thesis examines the impact of the Great Depression on four main branches of the Tasmania rural economy. Potatoes, dairying, sheep and fruit are examined separately with the discussion considering problems of locational change, factors behind increasing productivity, and changes in the processing and marketing of rural commodities. The interplay between policy and practice is constantly evaluated as farmers and the government tried to adapt to unprecedented stress in the traditional relationships between the producers and consumers of agricultural products.

The thesis concludes with an examination of the regional component within structural change. The agricultural regions of 1936/37 are defined and compared with those of the pre-depression period. The principal change involved the expansion of sheep farming. This was at the expense of cropping in northern Tasmania and of orcharding along the southern margin of the Midlands. A secondary change involved the expansion of dairying along the Northwest Coast. In addition, the annual rate of agricultural change was examined to determine the relationship between the economic cycle and rural restructuring. Local political and policy factors were found to be of major importance in determining the nature of the Tasmanian response to global depression.

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CONVENTIONS

The reader will rapidly become aware that a number of conventions have been followed throughout this thesis. Firstly, this study has used the units of measurements that were current in Australia during the 1930s. Acres, hundredweights and gallons have been used in place of hectares, tonnes and litres. It was believed that it would have been impossible to convert many of the statements that appeared in the historical record as they were obviously approximations rather than precise measurements. Other measurements, for instance a farm size of 160 acres or a subsidy of 3d per pound, have a logic in one system but not the other. It was therefore decided to retain the Imperial system of weights and measures for all units rather than opting for a hybrid that used one system for the easily convertible and the other for those that were difficult or meaningless to convert. A slightly different justification supports the use of the old currency of pounds, shillings and pence. The value of money has been so altered through time that it serves the useful function of distancing the reader from the modern era. As a datum for value, the average male industrial wage in Tasmania in 1926/27 was 206 per annum.

The second convention concerns the system for referencing source material. The arguments in an historical study are only as valid as the data that supports them. Therefore, the text must be as fully sourced as is practical. I have cited all material used with the exception of standard statistical sources such as the Statistics of Tasmania and the Census of Australia. However, in the process of synthesis, material derived from one citation may still be interwoven into the discussion a paragraph or two further along in the text. An intervening footnote may occur. Therefore, any attempt to follow up a topic through investigating the references must examine a range of citations from the appropriate subsection of the chapter. It is also important to note that the references are given in detail sufficient to find the archival file without difficulty, but that the specific document is defined only by date. In most cases, this will be the only document of that date. More formal referencing in the traditional "XX to YY" format was impractical given the nature of much of the documentation. There was a wide variety of formats - letters, memos, circulars, reports, minutes, etc. -but most were bland statements of "fact". In cases where opinion or occasion were of importance, then the author and his affiliation and the background were worked into the text.

The final point concerns terminology. The regional names that have been used in the text are those in common usage on some occasions and those defined for the purposes of agricultural regionalisation on others. The former can be confusing to anyone except a Tasmanian. The state suffered from a collective lack of imagination when it came time to name the major regions of the island. The Bible which had served so effectively for the naming of local features was ignored, and the county names borrowed from Britain were allowed to fall into disuse during the nineteenth century. This left such gems as the Northeast, the Northwest Coast and the South as regional labels. The boundaries of these areas also shift with context. One interpretation of the "popular" regions of the state appears in Figure 1 while formal agricultural regions are defined in Figure 5.